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Animal Children

ALEXANDER H. KRAPPE

STORIES OF WOMEN giving birth to animals are found all over the world, and serious chroniclers and historians have not disdained to report them. Many of these have their root in phenomena of abortions and miscarriages well known to medical science, the wild play of human fancy doing the rest. Such phenomena constitute the bulk of "monstrous births" which, viewed as portents of evil, were conscientiously recorded by the Roman historians: the pages of Livy, to give just one example, are filled with them.[1] It is likely that these birth omens belong to the large class of childish superstitions carried to Italy by the Etruscans; for much the same portents were known in ancient Babylonia, where they were classified and interpreted in learned treatises.[2] They will not concern us in the sequel.

Again, if in certain medieval texts mention is made of women giving birth to toads,[3] it is to be suspected that this fancy is somehow connected with the well-known conception of the matrix as a toad.[4] This class of tales will also be left out of account in the following pages.

Abstraction should also be made of tales belonging to the "werewolf" type, i.e., stories narrating how a woman may transform herself into an animal and in that shape give birth to an animal of the same species. Thus a Lapp tale reports how a woman transforms herself into a deer and, after having intercourse with a stag, gives birth to a fawn.[5] Again in South America a were-jaguar is thought to be the offspring of a human mother and an evil spirit.[6]

Closely related to this class of stories is another, in which the transformation is imposed by another person. It frequently also involves a change of sex. There exists a wild tale by which the Kizilbash of Asia Minor explain the

[1] Cf. Pliny, *N.H.*, VII, 3, and the observations of John Bostock, M.D., appended in the English translation published in the Bohn Libraries (II, 137); René Basset, *Mélusine*, III (1886–1887), cols. 527–528. For analogous modern cases cf. A. Orain, *La Tradition*, XVI (1902), pp. 329–331.

[2] Morris Jastrow, *Babylonian-Assyrian Birth-Omens*, Giessen, 1914 [Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten, XIV (5)], pp. 40 f.

[3] J. Bolte, *Zeugnisse zur Geschichte der Märchen* [*Folklore Fellows Communications*, No. 39] (Helsingfors, 1921), p. 16; H. E. Rollins, *The Pack of Autolycus* (Cambridge, Mass., 1927), pp. 185 ff.

[4] M. Höfler, *Globus*, LXXXVIII (1905), pp. 25–27; H. Magnus, *Mitteilungen d. Schlesischen Gesellschaft f. Volkskunde*, VIII (2) (1906), pp. 52 ff.; Marie Andree-Eysn, *ibid.*, VIII (17), pp. 48–54; K. Spiess, *Mitra*, I (1914), col. 209 ff.; R. Kriss, *Das Gebärmuttermotiv* (Augsburg, 1929); *Zeitschrift f. Volkskunde*, II (1930), p. 264; V. Alford and R. Gallop, *Folk-Lore*, XLVI (1935), p. 355. In Europe the concept goes back into the Middle Ages; cf. S. Singer, *Zeitschrift f. deutsche Philologie*, LII (1927), p. 88.

[5] C. F. Coxwell, *Siberian and Other Folk-Tales* (London [1925]), pp. 631 f.

[6] Th. Koch-Grünberg, *Zwei Jahre bei den Indianern Nordwest Brasiliens* (Stuttgart, 1923), II, 155.

widespread taboo of hare's flesh.[7] By a miracle of Ali, the caliph Omar was turned into a woman and bore two children, which were transformed into hares. For this reason these rodents have ever since been sacred to the Kizilbash.[8] It is obvious that this scurrilous tale not only explains the taboo referred to but was invented in the first place to cast opprobrium upon a caliph hated by the Shias.

The scurrility of the story is largely due to the view that the transformation of a man into a woman is most ignominious. In Scandinavian mythology Loki on one occasion transformed himself into a mare and, after intercourse with a stallion, gave birth to a fleet horse, the famous Sleipnir.[9] A similar transformation is thrown into his face as an act of ignominy and shame.[10]

It is well to remember, however, that the metamorphosis is not necessarily an original feature, or rather, if metamorphosis there was, it was in the opposite direction, a theriomorphic divinity being subsequently made into a god or a goddess in human shape. Thus if in Greece *Ερυνύς* gives birth to a foal, the horse Arion, the inference is that she herself was a mare, a conclusion borne out by the cult legend according to which she transformed herself into a mare to escape the pursuit of Poseidon. Again, if in the South Swedish and Danish traditions the goddess Gefion is the mother of four oxen, the inference is that she is herself a cow, the giver of all good things (as the very name *Gefion* indicates); for there is good evidence to show that the domestic cow was held to be a divine or quasi divine animal among all peoples of I.-E. speech—the Hindoo cow worship is merely a survival of this ancient state of affairs.[11]

Abstraction should be made also of stories of a purely fictitious character invented for the purpose of furnishing entertainment. In this class must be reckoned a Santal tale relating how a woman, after her husband's death, gives birth to a monkey child endowed with the power of speech and more clever than his human brothers.[12] In another Santal text belonging to a well-known fairy-tale type (Grimm, No. 55), one of the two wives of a raja gives birth to a mongoose, who in the end outwits the six human sons of his mother's rival, causing their death, in revenge for the ill treatment they had meted out to him.[13]

Nor are similar features wanting in European tales. Thus in a Greek story a woman gives birth to a goat; but the goat is able to throw off its goatskin and to transform itself into a beautiful young girl. By burning the skin she retains

[7] On this world-wide taboo cf. my study "Old Celtic Taboos," in *Folk-Lore*, LIII (1942), pp. 196–208, especially pp. 198 ff.

[8] F. W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* (Oxford, 1929), I, 241.

[9] *Hyndluljóþ*, 42; *Gylfag.*, c. 42.

[10] *Lokasenna*, 23.

[11] *Ynglingasaga*, c. 5; *Gylfag.*, c. 1.

[12] C. H. Bompas, *Folklore of the Santal Parganas* (London, 1909), pp. 56 ff.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 201 ff.

her human form for ever afterwards.[14] In a variant, the girl is a jackdaw; but in all other points the tale is the same.[15]

It is difficult to interpret the wild story of the birth of Aedh Sláine whose mother, after drinking water blessed by Finnian, Bishop of Aedh, first brought forth a lamb, then a silver salmon, and finally the hero.[16] This story, the oldest version of which is found in the Leabhar na h'Uidhre, appears to be a Christian modification of some pagan story; but in the present state of our knowledge it is impossible to draw more far-reaching conclusions.

Finally, cases are known where the alleged animal births were purely fraudulent.[17]

We now approach a different type of variants reporting animal births of human mothers. The Dyaks and Silakans abstain from killing cobras because one of their female ancestors once brought forth twins, a boy and a cobra. The cobra went into the forest but, before doing so, warned his mother to inform her children that if they were ever bitten by cobras they must remain for a day in the same place, and the venom would have no effect. This custom is still followed. The boy, the story goes on to say, met his cobra brother in the jungle and accidentally cut off his tail, whence it is that all cobras have even now a blunted tail.[18]

The birth of a snake from a woman recurs among the Ainos, who attribute the conception to the effect of the sun's rays. Subsequently the snake turned into a child, much as do the goat and the jackdaw of the Greek *Märchen* cited above.[19]

In the Solomon Islands a woman was said to have given birth to a shark, which was promptly adopted by the community and given the name of Muwatskawits. It was known ever afterwards to protect the tribe, chasing away hostile sharks.[20]

The Dyak tradition clearly explains a custom still current in the tribe; it would therefore seem etiological. There is, however, more to the matter. Among the Dinka of the Upper Nile, who are split up into a number of totem clans, the relationship between a clan and its animal ancestor or totem is commonly explained by a tradition to the effect that in the beginning a woman

[14] J. G. v. Hahn, *Griechische und albanesische Märchen* (Munich-Berlin, 1918), I, 224 ff.

[15] *Ibid.*, I, 288 ff.; cf. K. Müller-Lisowski, *Irische Volksmärchen* (Jena, 1923), p. 280.

[16] S. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (London, 1892), II, 89; E. Windisch, *Berichte Verh. Kgl. Sächs. Gesellsch. d. Wissensch., phil.-hist. Kl.* XXXVI (1884), pp. 200 ff. For other stories in which the fictitious element is clearly predominant, cf. A. C. Haddon, *Folk-Lore*, I (1890), pp. 49 ff.; M. Frere, *Old Deccan Days* (Philadelphia, 1889), p. 44; W. R. S. Ralston, *Russian Folk-Tales* (London, 1873), p. 227; G. Pitrè, *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari*, I (1882), p. 524.

[17] H. Gaidoz, *Mélusine*, III (1886–1887), col. 211.

[18] Spenser St. John, *Life in the Forests of the Far East* (1862), I, 196.

[19] B. H. Chamberlain, *Aino Folk-Tales* (1888), p. 43.

[20] B. Blackwood, *Folk-Lore*, XLIII (1932), pp. 83 f.

gave birth to twins, one of whom was the totemic animal and the other the human ancestor.[21]

Similar traditions are widespread among the North American Indians, from one of whose languages the very term "totem" was borrowed. Thus the Dog-rib Indians tell a story of how a dog which could assume human shape married a girl of the tribe. The girl's brothers, not relishing the thought of a canine brother-in-law, killed the dog and drove the woman away. She gave birth to six puppies, three of which remained dogs, while three turned into human children, the ancestors of the Dog-rib tribe.[22]

The idea that the divine or semidivine ancestor of the tribe, though an animal, is born of a woman recurs among the Haida Indians of the Queen Charlotte Islands, where the raven, the well-known demiurge and ancestor of many North American tribes, was born of a woman who had no husband.[23]

The Snake clan among the Moquis of Arizona is descended from a woman who gave birth to snakes. Much the same belief has been noted in former German New Guinea. Thus at Simbang, a village at the mouth of the Bubui River, a certain family will not harm crocodiles because they consider these reptiles their kinsfolk. As head of the family they recognize a certain aged crocodile, everywhere known as Old Butong, which is said to have been born of a woman at Simbang.[24]

In many islands of Indonesia (Java, Sumatra, Celebes, Timor, and Ceram) the people imagine that women are frequently delivered of a child and a crocodile at the same birth. The midwife is believed to carry the crocodile twin carefully down to the river and to place it in the water. The family propitiate their amphibious relative by putting victuals in the river, and the human twin is bound for the rest of his life to do his duty by his crocodile brother or sister. Sickness and death would inevitably ensue, should he be remiss in this obligation.[25]

The Bakalai, in Western Equatorial Africa, believe that their women once gave birth to the totem animals; one woman brought forth a calf, others a crocodile, hippopotamus, monkey, boar, or wild pig.

In all these instances the animals born of women are tribal ancestors; they explain the assumed relationship between tribal clans and certain animal species, a belief commonly known as totemism. Now it is interesting to note

[21] Sir James G. Frazer, *The Dying God* (London, 1935), p. 31.

[22] E. Petitot, *Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest* (Paris, 1886), pp. 262 and 311; S. Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indians* (Cambridge, Mass.), 1929, pp. 167 ff., 347 n. 247; Erna Gunther, *Folk-Lore,* XXXVIII (1927), pp. 42 ff.

[23] G. M. Dawson, *Report on the Queen Charlotte Islands, 1878* (Montreal, 1880), pp. 149 B f. [*Geological Survey of Canada*]; cf. Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* (London, 1918), I, 319.

[24] Frazer, *Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild* (London, 1935), II, 295.

[25] *Voyages of Captain James Cook round the World* (London, 1809), II, 316 ff.; E. Metzger, *Globus,* XLIV (1883), 314; G. A. Wilken, *Indische Gids,* 1884, p. 997 n.; H. Gaidoz, *Mélusine,* III, 254 f.; Frazer, *Spirits,* II, 212 f.

that these tales have a rather striking analogue in antiquity. From Herodotus (I. 84) we learn that a concubine of the Lydian king Meles bore him a lion. Meles was a member of the old Heraclid dynasty,[26] which derived its descent from the lion-hero Heracles. The wild tale that the king's concubine gave birth to a lion cub would suggest that the Lydian kings claimed kinship with the beast and posed as lions in their own persons, passing their sons off as lion cubs. This inference is borne out by a number of additional facts. The Lydian king Croesus dedicated at Delphi a lion of pure gold,[27] and Heracles, wearing his lionskin, is a common type on coins of Sardes. A verse of the Alexandrian poet Hipponax informs us that the Lydian royal name *Kandaules* signified Κυνάγχης, that is, 'strangler of dogs.' This name is I.-E., being composed of the word meaning 'dog' (*κύων, canis*) and 'strangle' (O.Sl. *daviti*) and appears to denote the lion, who is indeed a 'strangler of dogs.' Athenaeus reproduces a story from Xanthus, a Lydian historian, according to which a Lydian king named *Kambles* (= 'dog-killer') one night cut his wife to pieces and ate her. On the following morning he was found holding the hand (or arm) of the queen in his mouth. The scandal was great, and the anthropophagous king committed suicide.[28] If we assume that the epithet 'dog-killer' designates the lion and that the anthropophagous monarch was a lion, the strange story becomes less strange. It certainly goes far to bear out our surmise that the ancient Lydian kings considered themselves the descendants of a lion born of a woman, and this in turn would put the tradition among the many relating how the totem animal was born of a tribal ancestress.[29]

A similar conclusion may be drawn, it would seem, for the origin of certain Celtic traditions. There a woman is fabled to have given birth to twins or triplets, one of whom is the ancestral hero, while the other (or others) make for the sea, being turned into seals or fish.[30] Now we know from other sources that the seal was (and partly still is) an animal of considerable importance to the inhabitants of the Western Isles, as a result of which a rich seal lore is found in these regions. Seals are fabled to be able to assume human shape, and marriages of men with seal maidens loom large in folk-tales.[31] On the west coast

[26] Euseb. *Chron.* I. 69, ed. A. Schoene (Berlin, 1866–1875).

[27] Herod. I. 50.

[28] *Fragm. hist. graec.*, I, 39.

[29] These Lydian traditions and their Near Eastern ramifications have been dealt with by the writer in an article forthcoming in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*.

[30] W. J. Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy* (Cardiff, 1928), pp. 67, 86, 135, 212, 227 ff., 353.

[31] F. Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts* (London, 1866), p. 122; W. A. Clouston, *Popular Tales and Fictions* (Edinburgh, 1887), I, 182 f.; W. Larminie, *West Irish Folk-Tales and Romances* (London, 1893), pp. 224 f.; M. R. Cox, *An Introduction to Folk-Lore* (London, 1895), p. 101; W. Golther, *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1895), pp. 149 f.; W. A. Craigie, *Scandinavian Folk-Lore* (London, 1896), pp. 231 ff.; Th. Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology* (London, 1900), p. 169; G. F. Black and N. W. Thomas, *Examples of Printed Folk-Lore concerning the Orkney and Shetland Islands* (London, 1903), pp. 184 f.; Paul Herrmann, *Island in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Leipzig, 1907), II, 175; N. Colgan, *Gaelic Plant and Animal Names* (*Proceed. Roy. Irish*

of Ireland the people cannot even now be bribed to skin seals.[32] In other words, the seal played much the same role as the lion in Anatolia. Tales of multiple births representing a seal or seals as the brother or brothers of the ancestral hero can therefore have only one meaning, the former existence of a seal clan, or of seal clans, in Western Ireland and on the Isles.

At the other extremity of the Aryan world, in India, a similar story was current in Vedic times. In a text of the *Yajur Veda* we hear that Indra was told that he would be overthrown by a child of his as yet unborn. To prevent this happening, he entered the mother's body, thus causing himself to be reborn, instead of the dreaded child; but, lo and behold, a cow was born along with Indra. The story says nothing of the shape of the mother; but in view of Indra's strange twin sister and the veneration in which the cow has always been held in India, we are probably not far wrong in assuming that she was a cow. However this may be, the myth cannot be separated from the widespread prohibition to eat beef. Since such food taboos are one of the fundamental characteristics of totemism, the further conclusion may seem justified that the myth referred to harks back to a time when Indra was recognized as the tribal ancestor of the Aryans, whose totem animal (or one of them) was the domestic cow.[33]

From India also hails the curious tradition connected with the genealogy of the raja of Chutia Nagpur, a chief of the Naga or snake race. Raja Janameja, so the story runs, once prepared a *yajnya,* a magical incantation, to destroy all the people of the serpent race. To prevent this, the supernatural being, Pundarika Nag, assumed human form and married the fair Parvati, daughter of a brahman. As a result of the breaking of a taboo by the bride, he subsequently vanished. His wife became the mother of the serpent rajas of Chutia Nagpur. Pundarika Nag, in the form of a great hooded snake, guarded his first-born child. The crest of the house is a hooded snake with a human face.[34]

In this story the mother is human but the father is a serpent which may assume human form. Instead of twins, only one child is born, the ancestor of the dynasty. In the lost original of the tale this child was probably pictured as a hooded snake with a human face. Nor is it difficult to account for these modifications: they seem to be due to the passing from a matrilinear society to a patrilinear one. This meant the transfer of the chief role from the mother to the father; but the fact that the storytellers were careful to make the mother

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Acad., XXXI) (Dublin, 1911), pp. 27 f.; H. Holmström, *Studier över Svanjungfrumotivet i Volundarqvida och annorstädes* (Malmö, 1919), pp. 84 ff.; Hans und Ida Naumann, *Isländische Volksmärchen* (Jena, 1923), p. 295.

[32] A. Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (London, 1901), I, 59.

[33] *Ibid.*, I, 297.

[34] E. T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872), pp. 165 f.; A. Lang, *Custom and Myth* (London, 1901), pp. 80 f.

a brahman's daughter still points to the former importance of the dynasty's maternal ancestor. At all events, the coat-of-arms of these kings betrays their fancied relationship with the serpent family.

A similar story is current in Southern China: A dog wins the hand of an emperor's daughter who had been promised to any suitor who would slay the chief of the enemy forces, and goes with her into the mountains. Their children intermarry and become the ancestors of a tribe.[35] The tribe referred to is that of the Yao, belonging to the aborigines of Southern China.[36] But the same tribe is also known for dog taboos and a dog cult.[37] There can therefore be no doubt that the tradition again points to some form of totemism, while the mention of an animal father would indicate the prevalence of patrilinear kinship.

In the stories just reviewed the woman is the ancestress not only of the totemic clan but also of the animal species that constitutes the totem. The belief in the kinship of the clan with the animal species was, however, bound to disappear; as a result the story type had to undergo certain modifications if it was to survive.

In Belgium it was believed by country people that lizards have the following origin. A girl overly fond of finery but too poor to satisfy her desire, became the paramour of the Devil. She bore him two lizards, a male and a female, and from this couple all lizards are descended.[38]

This tradition has a striking pendant in Formosa. A brother and a sister, the only survivors from the Great Flood, married one another. The girl thereupon gave birth to two abortions, which were promptly thrown into the river. One became the ancestor of all fish, the other the ancestor of crabs.[39]

In other words, once the totemic element was dropped, our tale became a purely etiological story explaining the existence of certain animal species.

At all events, there is definite evidence to show the lingering of a belief in the possibility of women giving birth to animals. The late Gédéon Huet[40] pointed out that the ancient Mexicans as well as certain tribes of the Congo basin were persuaded that under certain conditions a woman might give birth to animals. In France we meet with the superstition that a woman who should venture to marry her godfather would give birth to twelve hedgehogs. In the Haute-Loire it is sufficient that a woman step over a hedgehog hidden under

[35] W. Eberhard, *Typen chinesischer Volksmärchen* (Helsinki, 1937) [*Folklore Fellows Communications*, No. 120], p. 71.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[38] J. W. Wolf, *Deutsche Märchen und Sagen* (Leipzig, 1845), No. 453, p. 562.

[39] Shinji Ishii, *The Island of Formosa and its Primitive Inhabitants*, pp. 13 and 20, reprinted from *Trans. of the Japan Society*, XIV (London, 1916); cf. Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, I, 229.

[40] *Les Contes populaires* (Paris [1923]), p. 55.

dry leaves to become pregnant and to give birth to little hedgehogs.[41] The reality of such beliefs is borne out, furthermore, by certain folk tales in which a woman is accused of having given birth to animals;[42] for it is clear that if these stories did not take for granted the possibility of such births, the innocent woman's husband, who believes the slander, would appear a perfect simpleton; but such is clearly not the intention of the storyteller.

To sum up the conclusions of this brief survey, we may say that the belief in a woman giving birth to animals is deep-rooted in human consciousness. Like many similar beliefs, it has more than one root. Two of the more important ones are (1) the occurrence of "monstrous births," i.e. abortions well attested by medical science but grossly distorted by human fancy, and (2) the ancient explanation of the assumed kinship of tribal clans with certain animal species (totemism) on the hypothesis that a common human ancestress gave birth to the human ancestor of the clan and to that of the animal species, the animal being generally the twin brother of the human ancestor.

[41] *Mélusine,* III, 170; E. Rolland, *Faune populaire de la France* (Paris, 1877–1915), VII, 44.
[42] R. Basset, *Mélusine,* III, 253 f.; Gaidoz, *ibid.,* col. 255 f.; Huet, *DeGids,* 1906, II, 433 f.